

Beyond HHS

An Analysis of Federal Resources Which Exhibit Impacts of the United States Opioid Epidemic

Emily Alford

In recent years, the opioid crisis across the United States has influenced the research of many professional fields. Widely known as a first stop information source for analysts and professionals in the medical and public health worlds, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) gathers and presents extensive data on prescription rates and overdose numbers to the public. However, the opioid crisis is a collective matter. It holds cause and effect economically, environmentally, and socially. This article explores resources developed by federal departments *outside* of HHS, which provide useful data and information relevant to their fields on such impacts. Departments such as Agriculture, Education, Labor, Housing and Urban Development—even the General Services Administration—make available statistics both the public and researchers can access to learn more about the effects of this crisis.

Background

Public health, financial and social impacts have all been felt from opioid addiction and misuse. This crisis has been made up of not only prescription pain medications, but also heroin and synthetic opioids like fentanyl. Prescription rates began to soar toward the end of the 1990s when medical professionals were instructed by pharmaceutical companies that addiction was not a concern, and three decades later, in 2017 the United States reported nearly 1.7 million people with prescription pain reliever related substance use disorders.¹

This same year, President Trump issued the Memorandum on Combatting the National Drug Demand and Opioid Crisis,² which stated:

It shall be the policy of the United States to use all lawful means to combat the drug demand and opioid crisis currently afflicting our country. Additionally,

the heads of executive departments and agencies, as appropriate and consistent with law, shall exercise all appropriate emergency authorities, as well as other relevant authorities, to reduce the number of deaths and minimize the devastation the drug demand and opioid crisis inflicts upon American communities.

The Department of Health and Human Services was not the only sector called on to address the crisis. Rather, each executive department received instructions to respond. Some departments have utilized HHS data to analyze their own interests, while others have developed their own sets of information. Americans can now access to better advise their professions, families and communities.

Examination

Described here are such resources available from a spread of United States executive agencies, outside of HHS, which either focus on or incorporate impacts of the opioid crisis.

NCES Indicators of School Crime and Safety (nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators)

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is part of the Department of Education and is responsible for the gathering of United States education data and information. NCES assembles and publishes a variety of online tools including *DataLab*, *College Navigator*, *Digest of Education of Statistics*, and *Indicators of School Crime and Safety*. The Institute of Education Sciences and the Bureau of Justice Statistics, housed in the United States Department of Justice, also contribute to *Indicators of School Crime and Safety*. This annual report depicts indicators on student safety and school crime which are gathered from surveys of students, educators as well as institutions

themselves. Notable indicators include students' reports of safety and security measures observed at school, discipline problems reported by public schools, and even statistics such as criminal incidents at postsecondary institutions. Most relevant to those studying the opioid crisis are the statistics reported on illegal drug availability and the prevalence of mental health services provided by public schools. Key findings, tables, figures, and of course a downloadable copy of the most recent publication are available through the NCES website.

ERIC (eric.ed.gov)

Another significant resource from the Department of Education is ERIC, the Education Resources Information Center. ERIC is an online research database containing journal publications, grey literature as well as book sources and is provided by the Institute of Education Sciences for both researchers and the general public. Users can search by date, source or publication type. The search result list can then be narrowed down to examine publications about a particular policy or location. Topics tend to focus on education-related matters, but vary within the field, including case studies highlighting specific communities, postsecondary opinion on illegal use of prescription drugs, needle and syringe programs, and reflections pertained for parents of students suffering from opioid use disorder. Many publications included on ERIC are peer-reviewed, and if desired, the user is able to differentiate and select only these to appear in the search results.

ROSA P (rosap.ntl.bts.gov)

ROSA P, named for Rosa Parks, is the National Transportation Library's Repository and Open Science Access Portal. Accessible to transportation researchers as well as the general public, ROSA P contains full-text journal articles, technical reports and datasets on a variety of transportation topics, particularly those from state departments of transportation and USDOT. Users can access fact sheets on drugs and human performance, observations of the current state of knowledge of drug-impaired driving, summaries on law enforcement attitudes on traffic safety, and other resources and information significant to those interested in transportation matters related to the opioid crisis.

HUD User (huduser.gov)

HUD User is a resource provided by the Office of Policy Development and Research (PD&R) of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which explores and makes available information on market conditions, community development matters and housing needs. The primary objective of PD&R is to present unbiased, raw data and information to aid

policy makers using a variety of approaches and viewpoints. HUD User is also available to the general public and helps users retrieve government publications and data sets on planning, development and technology. While not a direct source of opioid prescription or overdose mortality rates like other resources included here, HUD User provides a distinct platform for users studying housing effects of the crisis. Those researching impacts of the opioid crisis can access information on drug and criminal history restrictions for those seeking public housing, along with a widespread amount of case studies on supportive programs from specific communities.

The National Opioid Misuse Community Assessment Tool (opioidmisusetool.norc.org)

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development programs teamed up with the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago's Walsh Center for Rural Health Analysis to create the Community Assessment Tool. This resource provides overdose mortality rates by county with comparison features on social determinants. In addition to the ability to compare by location, users can visualize periodic changes in this data. A county-level prosperity index was added in June 2020. This is determined by county using indicators identified as social resilience, economic resilience, social risk or economic risk and ultimately allows the user to apply this tool to improve public health programs by being aware of such indicators. The Community Assessment Tool highlights certain selectors, such as injury-prone employment and substance use and mental health facilities, which may have direct correlation with overdose rates. Users can also factor in educational attainment, broadband access, household income and other determinants as well as pull up overdose mortality fact sheets on either the county or state level.

Bureau of Labor Statistics (bls.gov)

The Bureau of Labor Statistics gathers and makes available data significant to prospective workers, employers, as well as researchers and the general public. Included in this data are numbers on state occupational injuries and illnesses, productivity and costs, as well as worker characteristics. A major resource provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics is the Occupational Outlook Handbook, which provides job outlook, pay and state and local data on employment areas that relate to the health and social impacts of the opioid crisis. Researchers of the crisis can find numbers on job growth in fields such as substance abuse, behavioral disorder and mental health counselors, as well as police and medical physicians.

Collaborations

An assortment of federal agencies contributes to the ability of the public to interact with data integral to them as educators, parents, scholars, policy makers and community members. Additionally, multiple agencies have collaborated on several projects, which provide useful resources. Youth.gov (www.youth.gov), for instance, includes community asset assessment tools, funding information, maps and program details developed by a number of agencies across the federal government. Benefits.gov (www.benefits.gov) is an electronic platform containing explanations on benefit eligibility and application instructions. Incorporated are easily searched and discovered grants for substance abuse, prevention and treatment grants, as well as existing federally funded research on the crisis.

Conclusion

Each resource above showcases integral information on at least one aspect of the opioid crisis and its effects. It is not merely convenient that departments outside HHS provide resources to the public regarding the opioid crisis. It is imperative, as the

crisis goes well beyond public health. Educational, financial and community impacts all interact for this topic. This type of holistic approach to federally collected information, especially in e-government, is vital to a free and open government.

Emily Alford (alfordem@indiana.edu), Head of Government Information, Maps & Microform Services, Indiana University

Notes

1. Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality (CBHSQ). 2017 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Detailed Tables. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; 2018.
2. Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Administration, *Memorandum on Combatting the National Drug Demand and Opioid Crisis* DCPD-201700788 (October 26, 2017).